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# Preservation of the Great Sites in China, Han Chang'an City as Case Study

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## Abstract

The definition of the Great Sites in China originally appeared in the *Notice on Strengthening and Improving the Protective Work of Cultural Relics* issued by the State Council in 1997, in which the term was firstly used as Great Ancient Cultural Sites. Afterwards, the Great Sites specifically refer to Chinese cultural heritages in a large scale point like big archaeological sites or ancient tombs with prominent cultural values. As the Great Sites occupy a certain space in geographic environment, the general historical and unique regional attributes of the natural and social characteristics are possessed at the same time. Therefore, the Great Sites inevitably have close ties to the main body of economic activities that the local residents live in.

The site of Han Chang'an City (202 BC – 8 AD) is located in the northwest of downtown Xi'an, covered in an area of 36 square kilometers. It is the largest and most intact capital site preserved in China, owning the most abundant historical remains and the richest cultural connotation. After the last displacement of civilian population in 582 AD, Han Chang'an City was abandoned and successively turned into margins of human habitation and

countryside in the next few thousand years. Until around 1957, as the work of archaeological excavation proceeded by the Chinese Institute of Archaeology, the site was listed in the national first batch of monuments in 1961, under a special protection. Since then, it has been considered a representative of the Great Sites in China due to its extremely large scale, numerous discoveries and outstanding values. From then on, the whole area has been sealed up, fixed in a museistic way. In order to keep the relics from further destructions, all constructions on the site are strictly restricted, known as the Restrictive Protection. As a result, without any economic development caused by these limitative laws and regulations, the living standard within the region lags behind the rest of the city Xi'an, thus giving rise to a sharp contradiction between the heritage preservation and benefits for the local people. As time goes on, the faultiness of the Restrictive Protection on the Great Sites has been gradually revealed because the invading and occupying activities of the sites occur much more frequently than before.

With a rapid urbanization unparalleled in the history of China, lands are becoming so scarce that such Great Sites in golden section have proved to become burdens on the cities. To avoid artificial work that can only produce thematic parks, the transformation of Han Chang'an City must be considered seriously at present. Against this background and on the basis of several investigations, it is clear that Han Chang'an City needs a Dynamic Protection. Through a series of assessments and analyses, feasibility of local resettlement is made and new life mode in the protected zone is put forward. By making the preservation and the production a combination and the intensive land use and the village integration, Han Chang'an City can inject new functions while maintaining the traditional ones. The open attitudes towards the Great Sites will provide us new ways of preserving heritages and improving human

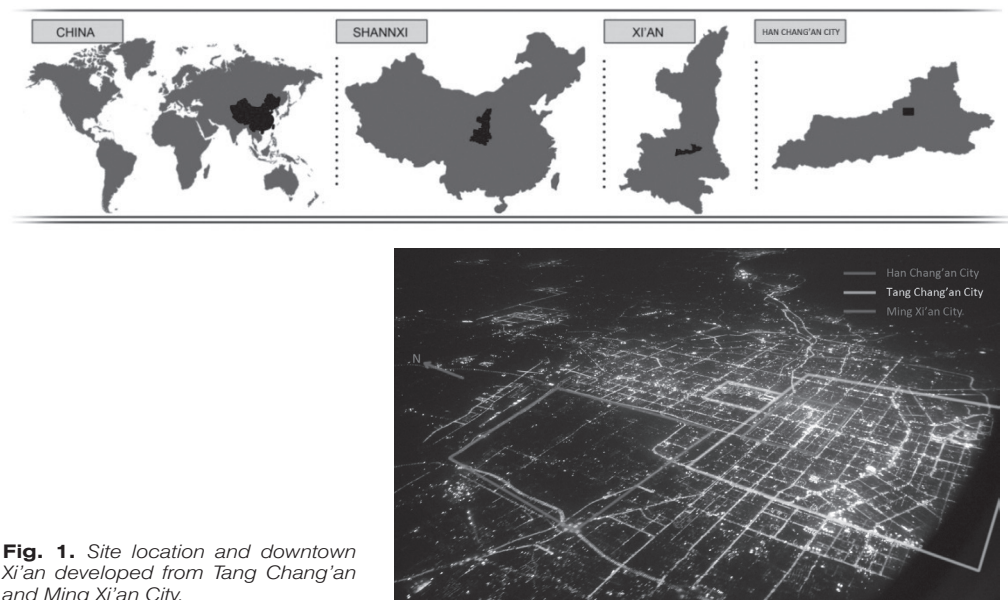
conditions simultaneously, which is of great benefit to Han Chang'an City's permanent clever transformation.

**Key words:** Great Sites; Urbanization; Dynamic protection; Permanent transformation

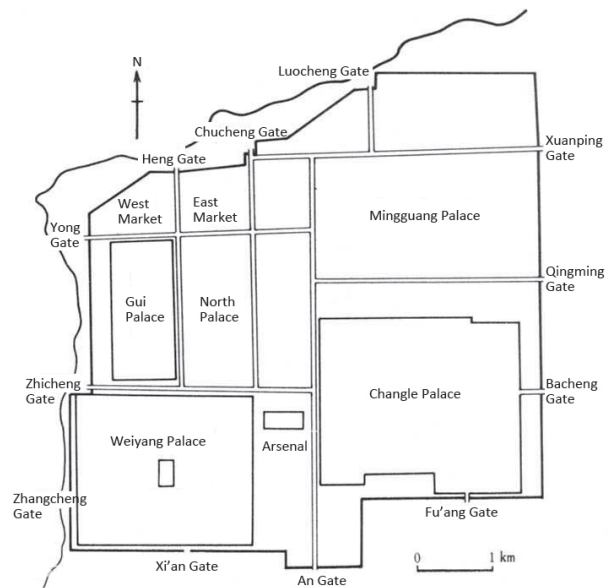
## 1 Background

Covering an area of 36 square kilometers, the site of Han Chang'an City is located in the northwest of Xi'an City<sup>1</sup>, which is the largest archaeological capital site in China (Fig.1). Being the starting point of the Silk Road<sup>2</sup>, Han Chang'an City was one of the oldest cosmopolitan metropolises in the same era of ancient Rome, and enjoyed the reputation of «Rome in the west while Chang'an in the east». Built in 202 BC and consisting of five major palaces and a twenty-five kilometer city wall (Fig.2), the splendid architectural complexes of Han Chang'an City influenced the construction of other official buildings in ancient China (Fig.3). After the 210 years of Western Han Dynasty and 195 years of Eastern Han Dynasty, there were another eight dynasties using the city as their own capital site in the following few hundred years. Until 582 AD, Han Chang'an City was totally abandoned when Suiwen Emperor constructed a new capital on the southeast of it<sup>3</sup>.

1. Situated in the center of China, Xi'an is one of the oldest Chinese cities where China's five-thousand-year history started to be established here. It used to be the capital of 13 dynasties in ancient China, including the first imperial dynasty Qin (221-207BC) and the most powerful dynasties Han (202BC-220AD) and Tang (618-907AD), and had been the political, economic and cultural center for more than 1100 years. At that time, Xi'an was called Chang'an.
2. Silk Road was an ancient network of trade routes connecting the East and the West originated in 139 BC in Han dynasty. It spanned a total length of 6440 kilometers all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, linking China with the west world in ancient times.
3. The new capital was called Daxing City in Sui Dynasty (581-618AD) and was renamed as the famous Tang Chang'an City in the later Tang Dynasty.



**Fig. 1.** Site location and downtown Xi'an developed from Tang Chang'an and Ming Xi'an City.



**Fig. 2.** General Plan of Han Chang'an City.



**Fig. 3.** Restoration model of the splendid palaces in Han Chang'an City, pictures from the documentary «China's Memory: Weiyang Palace» in 2010.

Being transformed into wildernesses, fields, villages and margins of human habitations during thousands of years, the site of Han Chang'an City was gradually excavated by the Chinese Institute of Archaeology, beginning in 1957. And then it was listed as an Important Historical Monument in 1961 and has become a representative of the Great Sites in China (Fig.4). Under special protection, the whole site has been sealed up for a long time, fixed in a museistic way, which is called Restrictive Protection. So far, most people living in the City are of rural populations. However in recent years, some farmers have moved out for a better life and the total number of the residents permanently dwelling there has been obviously reduced, from 57 thousand in 2009 to 41 thousand in 2017<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, a rapid development of the surrounding areas of the site makes a large number of migrant workers enter Han Chang'an City to rent a house for a low cost of life. Increasingly the existing villages in Han Chang'an City have become communities of low-income people. Currently, the productivity within the area is very low, almost without any economic advancement. Driven by strong willingness, the local inhabitants themselves spontaneously establish some self-owned industries in the site, such as garbage landfill, coal yards, and vehicle transportation. This does a lot of harm to the

4. The data comes from the Construction Leading Group Office of Han Chang'an City.

heritages more than ever and leaves behind a bad living environment (Fig.5). All these have revealed the faultiness of the Restrictive Protection, which seems to become the common problems the Chinese Great Sites are facing.



**Fig. 4.** Archaeological area of Weiyang Palace in Han Chang'an City, [http://www.sohu.com/a/119132526\\_501362](http://www.sohu.com/a/119132526_501362)

In October 2010, Daming Palace National Heritage Park<sup>5</sup> had a grand opening and the government had gained a lot of fame and economic benefits through that project. Then unprecedented attention was paid to the conservation and reuse of the site of Han Chang'an City, and the government decided to make it a second national heritage park. In 2012, the Leading Group Office Administrative Committee for the Construction of Special Zones of Han Chang'an City in Xi'an<sup>6</sup> was set up, marking the official start of the protection and utilization of the site. But completely different from the 3.2 square kilometers

5. Daming Palace was the political center and national symbol of the Tang Dynasty, which covered an area of 3.2 square kilometers. After the removal of 100 thousand people including 89 enterprises and 6 neighborhoods on the site in 2007, it was designed as a National Heritage Park which cost over one hundred million Yuan.

6. It is a governmental organization composed of the experts in history, archaeology, conservation and planning.



**Fig.5.** Present living environment of Han Chang'an City, taken in 2013-2017.

Daming Palace in which the relics are relatively concentrated, the remains in Han Chang'an City are too dispersed, together with 54 villages scattered in the farmlands<sup>7</sup>. In brief, it is absolutely illusory to change the 36 square kilometers Han Chang'an City into a thematic park and it is also unconvincing to remove away all the residents from the zone. How are we going to protect the site and improve the living standard in the site at the same time so that heritage preservation can be integrated into daily life and the people could get a better development without leaving their home?

7 Wenliang Chen, Lei Yang, The residents' destroy to the Great Sites based on the analyses of residents' protection attitude, Journal of Northwest University (Natural Science Edition), 2011, 41(5): 887-892.



## 2 Assessment of land function suitability

Over 2200 years have passed, while most remains of the site are still buried underground and waiting to be discovered, a unique landscape has emerged, in which the relics and the farmlands are coexistent, with the villages interspersed (Fig.6). In order to protect the heritage and ensure the further archaeological work, only the shallow root crops of the agricultural planting are allowed<sup>8</sup>. But fixing in a museistic way is not a permanent solution. The scholar Wenliang Chen established a model called PRED Coordination on the site of Han Chang'an City to introduce the analysis factors in geographic system into the conservation and reuse of the Great Sites<sup>9</sup>. In PRED, P is people, on behalf of the social and economic activities of local residents; R refers to cultural resources, like the ground or underground relics; E means site environment, that is, the environmental features of the protected area including cultural and ecological contexts; D is a coordinated clever development. Professor Wenliang Chen is also the first expert who put forward the Dynamic Protection on the Great Sites like Han Changan City, aiming to make the site protection and the residents' production a combination, so as to provide a possibility of sustainable and permanent transformation on the site. Dynamic Protection is greatly different from Restrictive Protection, for it not only emphasizes the ontological value<sup>10</sup> but also highlights the economic and social values. Based on this, an evaluation of the land function suitability in Han Chang'an City is carried out, in order to explore the

8. Wenliang Chen, Xiangshan Wu, Wei Luo, Xinjun Yang, Rong Zhao, Analysis of land use risk in large historical sites in suburban areas, Han Chang'an City as an example, *Resource Science*, 2007, 29(3): 198-205.

9. Wenliang Chen, Zuqun Zhang, Rong Zhao, PRED coordination development of Han Chang'an City, *City Planning Review*, 2006, 30(7): 63-67.

10. The ontological value here means the historic, scientific and aesthetic value the heritage originally owns.





**Fig. 6.** Landscape of Han Chang'an City, [http://www.sohu.com/a/119132526\\_501362](http://www.sohu.com/a/119132526_501362)

feasibility of the resettlement in the protected zone itself and further comes up with a suitable residential way on the Great Sites.

According to several on-the-spot investigations, we know that the land usage of Han Chang'an City is mainly about farmlands and villages, supplemented by large transportation businesses, medium and small sized warehouses and mining industries (Fig.7); Besides, the protected zone is surrounded by intercity highways, and most of the original streets in the City have been replaced by new roads as time goes on (Fig.8), thus it is difficult to recover its former network structure in history. Then an assessment of the land function suitability is made on the basis of site surveys and the *Overall Protection Plan of Han Chang'an City (2009-2025)*<sup>11</sup>

11. The Overall Protection Plan of Han Chang'an City was an official document drawn up by Shaanxi Provincial Bureau of Cultural Relics in Northwestern University in 2009.

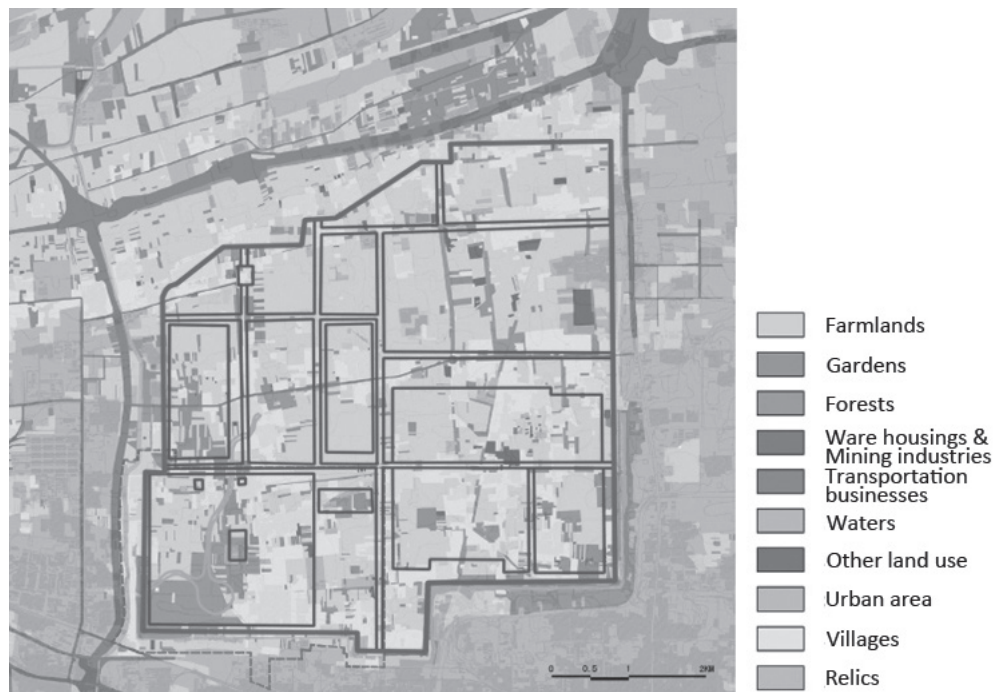


Fig. 7. Present land functions of Han Chang'an City

from the Leading Group Office. The temporary results are: 1) A majority of the remains are concentrated in Weiyang, Changle and Gui Palace, so it is undisputed to develop tourism in these three areas, which is not only beneficial for conveying historical information to the public but also conducive to further archaeological excavations; 2) Commercial services might cause certain damages to the historical environment, therefore it is better to arrange them in the districts with scattered relics, such as East and West Market that would have been commercial places before and were very famous for country fairs on special days; 3) Large pieces of farmlands had been formed in Han Chang'an City, especially in Mingguang and North Palace, which had better be well retained to continuously extend the farming culture of China since ancient times.

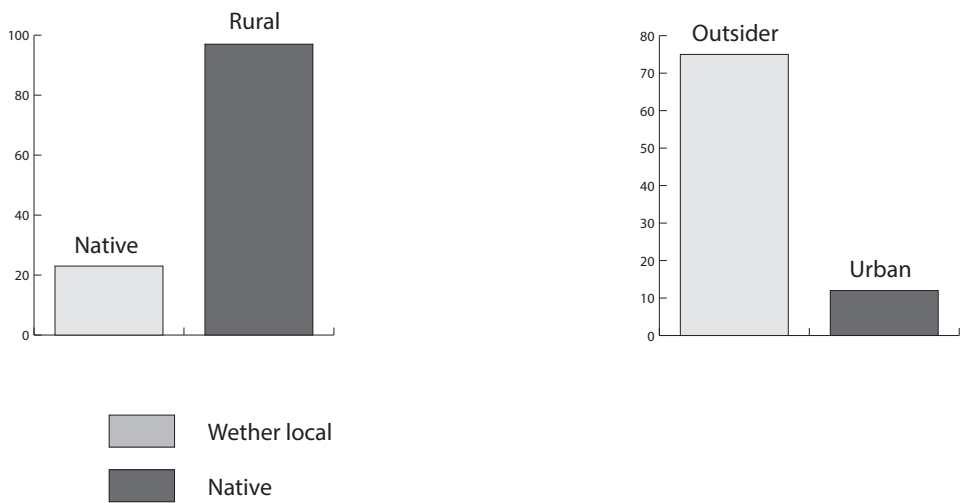


**Fig. 8.** *Present traffic network of Han Chang'an City.*

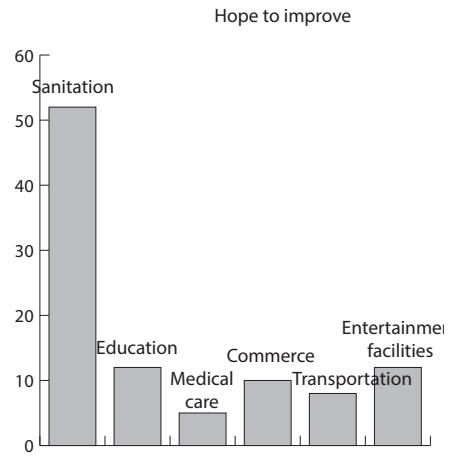
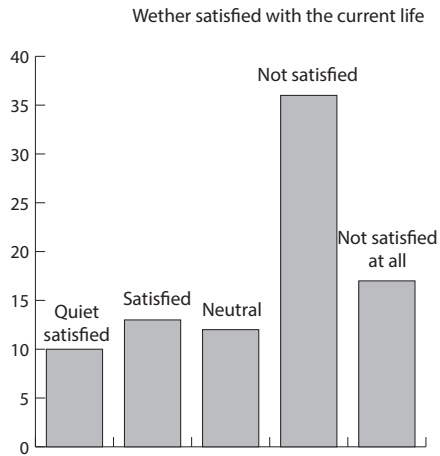
How about the people and their current industries? The enterprises in Han Chang'an City are distributed messily and casually, bringing about serious destructions on the site. Instead, the large transportation businesses should be rearranged in the edges of the City where it links to the external traffics easily. The medium and small sized warehouses can be gathered in the corners. As for the mining industries and garbage landfills which have caused much pollution, it is must be strictly prohibited. At the same time, interviews and questionnaires have been conducted on the villagers from population composition, life satisfaction, attitudes towards heritage and relocation and housing situation five aspects (Fig.9). The conclusions are as follows: 1) The whole population is composed of 2/5 local residents and 3/5 floating workers. The local residents are mainly farmers who own property and can offer rental houses to the migrant workers at a very low price; 2) The degrees of local people's life satisfaction vary greatly. They are satisfied with the calm and stable life and the

reliable and fixed finance source, but not content with the bad living environment and the incomplete public service facilities; 3) The great mass of local people do not know that they are living in a historical site. People who know are not only disgusted with the protection policy but also have weak awareness, poor knowledge and low support on heritage protection; 4) A majority of villagers are willing to be relocated only when they are fully compensated, but they also worry that the future income could not bear the city life, so they prefer not to leave Han Chang'an City at the moment; 5) Their local housings are three or four levels self-built commercial and residential combinations. House-owners pay most attention to the convenient communication with their neighbors and hope to maintain the flexible rentable forms instead of living in high-rise buildings after moving.

1) Demographic

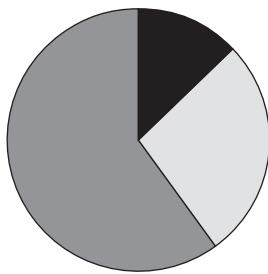


## 2) Life satisfaction

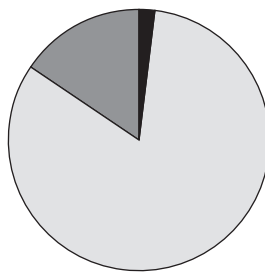


## 3) Attitudes towards heritage

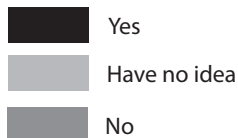
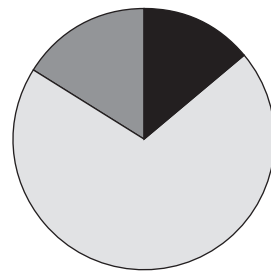
Do you think that daily production has caused damage to the site?



Does the present protection policy hinder your family income?

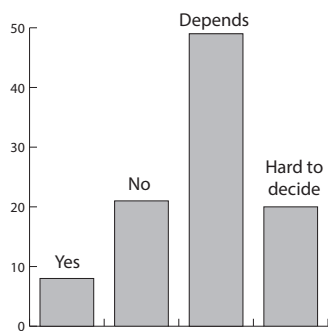


Do you have any confidence in the development of the zone in near future?

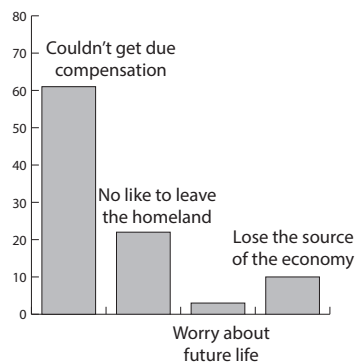


4) Attitudes towards relocation

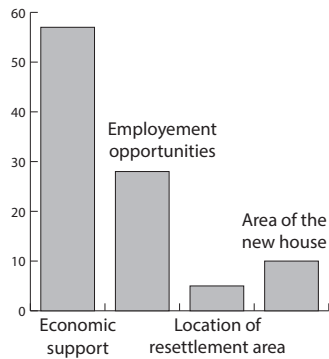
Willing to move?



Why not move?



Think highly of what compensation when have to move



5) Housing situation

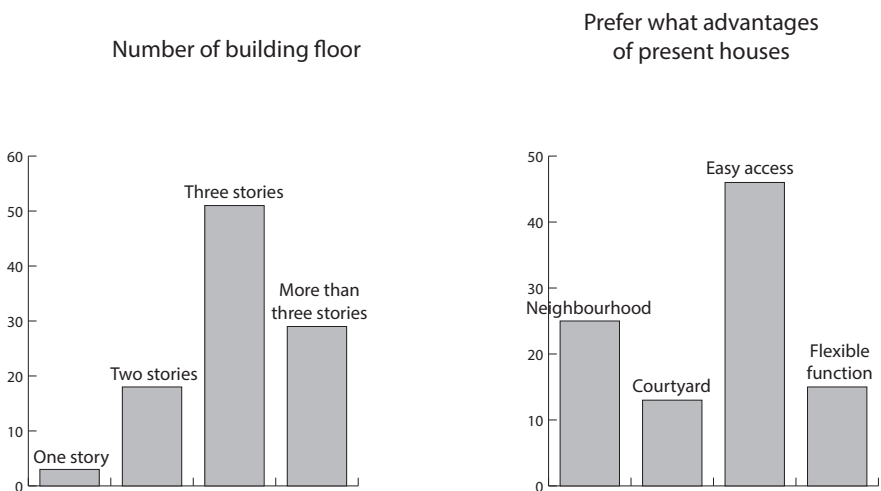


Fig. 9. Questionnaire statistics.

3 A new way of living

In recent years, with the expansion of the scale of Xi'an at an unprecedented rate, Han Chang'an City has been included in the urban scope, though being kept as a state of immutability for many years. And with the spontaneous emergence of industries and the increased number of external populations in the city, more people have realized that the whole site ought not to continue walking in the old steps and seclude itself. In other words, the site should not stay in the current situation any more. In fact, researchers have proposed a series of development modes for Han Chang'an City from a very early time, for example the



sightseeing agriculture<sup>12</sup>, archaeological tourism<sup>13</sup>, urban agriculture<sup>14</sup>, comprehensive heritage park<sup>15</sup> or «site exhibition area + construction control zone + cultural industry park»<sup>16</sup> etc., but few of them were concerned with the local residents' living state. Massive urbanization is not simply about resettlement, working chances for people and the improvement of their quality of life should also be taken into consideration. Now their lives are closely linked with their own industries in the zone that guarantees their basic living security. And no matter the modern and sightseeing agriculture, or the heritage and archaeological park, all are bound up with history and culture. Therefore as the times require, a new way of living combined with the distinguished culture called Rural Landscape Community<sup>17</sup> is presented as a solution. Taking the Great Sites as background and based on the reservation of rural settlements and agricultural lands, Rural Landscape Community intends to accomplish a modernization of the villages and a transformation of the farming under the rules of protecting relics, leaving Han Chang'an City a special natural landscape and an

12. Rong Zhao, Baoxiang Li, Development of sightseeing agriculture and the protection of Han Chang'an City, *Economic Observer*, 1999(1): 34-37.

13. Dongji Quan, Xiaoping Huo, Protection of the Great Sites and development of tourism, the planning on Han Chang'an City, *Journal of Northwest Institute of architecture and Engineering (Natural Science Edition)*, 2001(4): 65-69.

14. Haijuan Yang, Deyi Zhou, The development of urban agriculture in Han Chang'an City, *Journal of Northwestern University (Natural Science Edition)*, 2002(1): 105-109.

15. Dongji Quan, Haixia Zhu, The strategic research on the protection and utilization of Han Chang'an City, *Economic Geography*, 2003(3): 409-413.

16. Haiqiang Fan, Han Yuan, A new model for the interactive development of protection and utilization of the Great Sites, an overall planning of Han Chang'an City, *Planners*, 2008(2): 19-22.

17. Weihong Liu, The protection and sustainable development model of Han Chang'an City based on the theory of Garden City, *Journal of Northwestern University (Natural Science Edition)*, 2017, 4(47): 283-288.

ecological environment, which highlights the superiority of the big ruins contexts.

As a matter of fact, this concept Rural Landscape Community was thought of in my undergraduate graduation design in 2013 titled *Resettlement Planning for a New Way of Dwelling in Mingguang Palace, a Protected Area of Han Chang'an City*<sup>18</sup>. For achieving it, firstly, villages occupying the ruins should be gathered together where no relics were discovered by exploration, accomplishing the nearest adjustment and replacement. Centralized resettlement not only avoids idle lands and reduces the waste of land resources, but also saves the funds of demolition and construction. Secondly, traditional space planning and new housing types designing evolved from local farmers' existing houses create spatial organizations that closely connected with their everyday life. Besides, the new integrated villages welcome outsiders' approaching, facilitating an interaction between the residents and the visitors. Guests can even experience the local daily productive activities, such as potting, embroidery and spinning and weaving which had been native customs for generations and have been revived to offer new jobs for villagers. A diversified experience produces infinite possibilities. Thirdly, modernization of infrastructure is absolutely necessary. Good conditions increase people's enthusiasm for heritage conservation while better environment allows more chances for landscape preservation. The landscape here takes an optimization of the present agriculture without expropriation, transforming ecological plantings to sightseeing landscapes, which highly enhances the added values of the farmlands in Han Chang'an City and enjoys unique scenery (Fig.10). All in

18. This project focused on the 390 hectare Mingguang Palace in Han Chang'an City and won the third prize of the excellent graduation design of Shaanxi Province in 2013.



**Fig. 10.** *Southeastern border of Han Chang'an City, taken in August 2017.*

all, everything is for an endogenous development that can make a sustainable economy and society in the City.

#### **4 Summary**

In any case, there is understandably a presumption that by logical integration and reasonable relocation, Han Chang'an City is fully capable of providing lands for re-settling the existing population in a 36 square kilometer protected zone. Although city planners and heritage conservationists are still stuck in the idea of this site is sacrosanct, they have to admit that the policy of Restrictive Protection has stifled the vitality of the area. Since we could not stop the development, we can try to renovate and transform it orderly. After retaining mature local industries and injecting new urban functions, Han Chang'an City can regain energy and be better

communicated with the outside. Meanwhile, by trying hard to let more villagers have a sense of protecting monuments, the heritages can prolong life and be effectively understood. In this way, a new way of living like Rural Landscape Community is probably a positive attempt to achieve it, which also spurs the city to diversify. And from my point of view, it is true that keeping the history of the present is equally important as protecting the past records. When the monuments are treated with a sincere and kind manner, when the sites go into our public life rather than sit up high in a leading position, a harmonious co-existence between heritage and people can be obtained. And on a final note, we appeal that the related experts would pay more attention to the local people in the Great Sites and more scholars would participate in the research of Han Chang'an City to promote its permanent clever transformation in near future. We are sure that Han Chang'an City will be a special zone in Xi'an, a contemporary new town combining farming civilization and can offer more urbanization possibilities. In short, it is not a site in the city, but a city in the site.

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